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SUBJECT: AUSTRIAN MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS: May 03, 2007

Cabinet Approves Election Reform

¶1. The coalition government agreed on a package of election reforms Wednesday, which will now be sent to Parliament for approval. The reforms propose holding general elections every five years instead of four, as well as lowering the voting age from 18 to 16. It will also make it easier for absentee voting by mail. Other measures call for lowering the age that citizens can run for political office from 19 to 18; however, the eligible age to run for President will remain at 35. Following the cabinet meeting, both Chancellor Alfred Gusenbauer and Vice-Chancellor Wilhelm Molterer praised the reforms as a boost for Austrian democracy.

Although the Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor praised the package of election reforms agreed on by the government yesterday, not everyone was convinced, suggests semi-official daily Wiener Zeitung. Austrian political analyst Fritz Plasser argues that the decision to lower the voting age "was a bit premature" and adds it was carried out with little national debate over whether 16-year-olds are mature enough to be "politically aware." Another political scientist, Peter Filzmaier, said there should be more courses in schools on civics to give students a better overview of politics and social issues. Like all Austrian media, liberal daily Der Standard quotes Gusenbauer and Molterer as emphasizing that the reform package is a "major democratic-political step. The daily also notes that all opposition parties have welcomed the decision to lower the voting age.

Support for Climate Protection Fund

¶2. During its meeting yesterday to approve reforms of Austria's voting laws, the coalition cabinet also gave its support to the creation of a 500-million-Euro climate protection fund, which will begin operating on July 1st.

According to a report in semi-official daily Wiener Zeitung on the new Austrian climate protection fund, a presidium consisting of Chancellor Alfred Gusenbauer (SPOe), Environment Minister Josef Proell (OeVP), Economics Minister Martin Bartenstein (OeVP) and Transport Minister Werner Faymann (SPOe) will be overseeing the fund.

It is to focus on making public transport more attractive, as well as developing and marketing technologies, which will protect the environment. Money for the new fund will come from recent increases in fuel and energy prices, according to government officials. The EU recently committed itself to reducing carbon dioxide emissions by 30 percent over 1990 levels, the daily adds.

Discussion With US Experts

¶ 13. ... headlines an Austrian regional daily, reporting that after learning about the US political system, students at a high school in Krems, Lower Austria, met with three representatives of the US Embassy in Vienna. Their detailed presentation of US presidential elections provided the students with insights into American political structures. In the ensuing discussion, the Embassy representatives answered the students' numerous, and "at times, quite critical," questions, according to regional daily Niederoesterreichische Nachrichten.

Criticism Of OMV's Iran Deal

¶ 14. Austrian media continue to report on the oil corporation OMV's planned deal with Iran, which met with harsh criticism from the United States. The Bush administration has emphasized its opposition to Austria's plan to tap into the huge Iranian oil and gas reserves, after OMV signed a so-called "heads of agreement" with the National Iranian Oil Company NIOC last month. According to an Austrian weekly, spokesperson for the US State Department Sean McCormick underscored that the US would "talk to the Austrian government and the firm involved." Independent political weekly Profil in its April 30 issue suggest that Washington may have done so already, and quotes US Embassy Vienna spokesperson William Wanlund as pointing out that "whenever appropriate we raise our concerns about the consequences of doing business with the Iranian government."

Fence to Protect US Embassy

¶ 15. ... headlines the Austrian Press Agency, reporting on the new security fence around the US Embassy property in Vienna's 9th district. Construction of the new security fence and lighting at the Boltzmanngasse property to "replace the former, unsightly security barriers" was concluded in March, the press agency says, quoting US Embassy spokesperson William Wanlund. Both the Embassy and the district authorities have dismissed as "incorrect" allegations floated in the Austrian media last year that Boltzmanngasse residents had complained about the security fence. The project was discussed with and approved by the Embassy's neighbors, and the costs for the project are borne by the US Government. Reporting on the new security fence around the US Embassy property in Vienna, Austrian Press Agency APA also emphasizes that the construction project is not a reaction to any kind of current threat to the Embassy. In addition, the fence was "lower than we expected initially," head of the authorities for the 9th Vienna district Martina Malyar says. Instead of four meters as originally envisaged, the security fence is only "a bit under three meters high" APA writes.

French Presidential Candidates in TV Debate

¶ 16. Around 20 million viewers followed last night's televised confrontation between the contenders for the French Presidency. Socialist candidate Sgolne Royal forced her Conservative rival Nicholas Sarkozy onto the defensive during a heated debate, attacking his record in office and accusing him of political immorality. The two also clashed over employment, the economy, the environment and law and order. Political analyst say there is no clear winner of the debate. The runoff vote will take place on Sunday. All Austrian media report on the two French presidential candidates' televised debate yesterday. Liberal daily Der Standard says there were some "harsh words" between Sgolne Royal and Nicholas Sarkozy during the "thrilling TV duel." The two-hour confrontation was the "high point of months of election campaigns," the daily adds. It remains to be seen whether Royal succeeded in turning the tables with her performance, the Standard says. Semi-official daily Wiener Zeitung headlines "High noon for Sarkozy and Royal," rating the TV debate as a "high standard, gripping and entertaining" event. While the majority of Austrian media are undecided as to the winner of yesterday's debate, mass-circulation daily Kurier sees Socialist candidate Royal as having presented the better performance. "Surprisingly aggressive, Sgolne Royal gave her competitor Nicholas Sarkozy a hard time," the daily says. And in mass-circulation tabloid Oesterreich, journalist Antonia Rados in

her analysis suggests the debate was the "most aggressive discussion in France so far."

Key Iraq Conference in Egypt

17. Representatives of over 60 countries are gathering in the Egyptian resort of Sharm el-Sheikh today for an international conference on Iraq. The meeting aims at bringing stability and economic recovery to the country and at ending sectarian violence. Representatives of Iraq's neighbors, including Iran and Syria, as well as of the G-8 and the EU are due to attend the conference. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has not ruled out side talks

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with the Iranian and Syrian foreign ministers.

Analyzing the upcoming conference in Sharm el-Sheikh on stability and economic recovery in Iraq, centrist daily Die Presse points out that in Egypt, the "foreign ministers of the US and Iran will be sitting at one table for the first time." US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice "wants to discuss assistance for Baghdad, but she's also keeping on the table the option for nuclear talks" with Iran, the daily adds. Although both the US and Iran have tried to dampen expectations regarding potential bilateral talks, everyone's attention will be focused on the meeting between the US and Iranian top diplomats, the Presse suggests. In an interview with liberal daily Der Standard, UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon says he will "officially launch an international aid initiative for Iraq in Sharm el-Sheikh, the 'International Compact for Iraq.' In addition, we are looking at ways to expand our presence in and support for Iraq. So far, conditions on the ground there have restricted our options." Asked whether he believes the US-led invasion of Iraq was a mistake, Ban Ki Moon answered: "Personally, as well as officially as UN Secretary General, it would not be wise for me to talk about what

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went wrong and what went right at this point. In the past four years, we've encountered so many difficulties, the Iraqi people have suffered so much, that the international community, the UN and the multi-national forces need to do everything in their power so that the Iraqi people can re-establish security and enjoy their freedom. The regional powers, too, should commit themselves more to a peaceful Iraq."

For full interview in German go to: <http://derstandard.at/> --> Politik --> International --> Iraq --> Ban Ki Moon im Interview:

Lage im Irak schrdnkt UN-Arbeit ein

Push To Overcome Iraq Deadlock

18. President Bush and leading Democrats have vowed to find common ground on Iraq to overcome a deadlock over funding for US troops. The US President met with Democratic leaders at the White House a day after he vetoed a bill linking war funding to a timetable for withdrawal of US forces from Iraq. Democrat House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said the meeting had been positive. Meanwhile, the Democrats have suffered a setback, as a 222-203 vote in the House of Representatives on Wednesday fell far short of the two-thirds majority needed to override President Bush's veto of the bill. Commenting on the deadlock between US President Bush and leading Democrats over a bill linking funding for the war in Iraq to a pullout of US troops there, senior columnist for mass-circulation daily Kronen Zeitung Ernst Trost writes: "With the presidential veto the fight has just begun. It's all about the 124-billion-dollar budget for Iraq. The Democrats set a deadline for withdrawal in the bill, knowing that this is unacceptable for President Bush. He is one of the few Americans who still believes in victory in Iraq. And for him, anyone who calls this into doubt is a scaremonger and a traitor. The Democrats do not want to be charged with damaging the troops' mission, either. Since they do not have the necessary two-thirds majority to overrule the veto, they now have to forge a compromise with the Republicans. (...) In popular opinion at least, the opponents of the war have long had a clear majority."

Calls for Olmert's Resignation

¶9. All major Austrian media report on the ongoing power struggle in Israel, where Prime Minister Ehud Olmert is defying calls from within his Kadima Party to step down following the publication of a critical report on his handling of last year's conflict in Lebanon. Several party members said they are backing for Olmert after Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni called on him to resign, ORF online news writes.
McCaw